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Jewish Digital Library: Significance and Role

Abstract: The most contemporary methods of preserving the memory of the Holocaust, given shape at the Yad Vashem Memorial Center in Jerusalem, imply that research is not limited only to the duration of the Holocaust, but is expanded to include everything that historically, culturally, and ideologically preceded it, as well as what constitutes as its consequences. The digital environment, new media, and social networks have significantly accelerated and enriched this process, enabling data and information to be intentionally collected, archived, efficiently disseminated, and made visible and accessible worldwide. The Jewish Digital Library is also being developed in this direction and at the end of 2019 it started creation of a thematic repository focused on collecting, consolidating, digitizing, presenting, promoting, and preserving Jewish cultural, religious, and secular heritage. By establishing a comprehensive, organized, and unique thematic online database, this library contributes to the easier and faster accessibility and greater visibility of academic and professional literature related to Jewish heritage and, in particular, the Holocaust in Serbia and the former Yugoslavia.

Keywords: Jewish history, Jewish written heritage, digital repository, digitization, dissemination, Holocaust

Introduction

Many publications have been issued worldwide about the rich Jewish history, religion, culture, and tradition. An impressive number of books and journals printed in almost all languages and countries of the world, scholarly and professional works, diaries, studies, and many other publications, testify to the participation of the

Jewish people in the civilizational dynamics. Such publications also exist in our region. Numerous studies of the rich Jewish heritage show that, from the first Jewish book *Tikun Hatzot (Midnight Prayers)* from 1837¹ and the first Jewish journal *El Amigo del Pueblo* from 1888² to the present day, over a thousand books, 76 Jewish newspapers and magazines,³ and several thousand articles, studies, researches, testimonies, and other texts and documents have been printed and published.

Many bookstores, libraries, and cultural societies founded by Jews, especially between the two world wars, were renowned and well-known gathering places for Yugoslav intellectuals and artists and became part of our national heritage as a whole. So, for example, the Cultural-Educational Society *La Benevolencija* in Sarajevo had a building and a library with over 100,000 books; unfortunately, only a small number have been preserved. The Geca Kon Bookstore in Belgrade was a prominent meeting place for notable writers and intellectuals, and its owner, Geca Kon, was one of the leading Yugoslav booksellers and publishers. This bookstore published some of the most significant Yugoslav literary and scholarly works. The Nazis killed Kon and his family and confiscated their property; the printing press was used to spread Nazi propaganda, and many books were taken to Germany and Austria. The Jewish Reading Room in Belgrade was also one of the most important Jewish cultural institutions between the two wars. This institution held four thousand book titles and periodicals and had great significance, not only for the Jewish community, but also for the cultural history of Serbia as a whole. At the beginning of the war, all property, books, archives, and furniture, was looted or destroyed. The bookstore, printing press, and library of Lavoslav Hartman, Stjepan Kugli, and Albert

¹ Ženi Lebl, *Jewish books printed in Belgrade: 1837–1905*. (Gornji Milanovac: Dečje novine, 1990), 57.

² Biljana Albahari, *Listanje vremena: Jevrejska periodika u Srbiji: 1888–2016* (Belograd: Narodna biblioteka Srbije, 2017), 25.

³ Biljana Albahari, *Overview of Jewish periodicals in Serbia (1888–2019): 2nd supplemented electronic edition* (Belgrade: B. Albahari, 2020), 7. Retrieved November 10, 2023, from <https://jevrejskigitalnabiblioteka.rs/handle/123456789/1250>

Dajč from Zagreb was a renowned institution and the largest publishing house in Croatia. It published around four thousand titles. In the Morpurgo Bookstore in Split, intellectuals and representatives of the Dalmatian national movement used to gather. Its founder, Vid Morpurgo, a Jew from Split, was a publisher, librarian, and politician. During the fascist occupation, the bookstore was looted, and many books were burned. The Morpurgo Bookstore published more than one hundred books, and its catalogues included around five thousand titles.

Based on these few examples, one can only infer the richness of the historical and cultural heritage of the Yugoslav Jewish community, yet also the scale of its destruction during the Holocaust. Even though this valuable heritage was mostly destroyed, several Jewish institutions, state archives, libraries, NGOs and individuals have been striving to collect and preserve traces of its existence. Thus, for example, the Library of the Federation of Jewish Communities currently holds around seven thousand volumes of thematic books and journals. The Jewish Historical Museum, also a unique institution of its kind in our country, preserves in its library about three hundred of the oldest and most valuable manuscripts, books, and journals. The library of the Jewish Community of Zagreb contains about twenty thousand publications in various languages, as well as non-book collections, posters, notes, and other materials. The Lavoslav Šik Library, affiliated with the Jewish Community of Zagreb, was named after Dr. Šik, a distinguished jurist, book lover, collector, and Zionist who perished in the Holocaust. Dr. Šik collected about seven thousand books and journals; his library is considered one of the largest Judaic libraries rescued during World War II in this part of Europe. The library of the Jewish Community in Sarajevo also owns a significant fund, much of which was preserved during the Nazi occupation. It holds a large number of old and valuable religious books and manuscripts, periodicals, and other publications in Hebrew, Ladino, Spanish, and German language. In addition, almost all Jewish communities have small libraries that are not registered in the official library network; their content and funds are insufficiently researched. Additionally, many state libraries and archives

across the former Yugoslavia are also in possession of similar materials, which have been only partially processed and classified.

After the end of World War II, these preserved collections, primarily within the remaining Jewish institutions, received a significant addition of materials related to the Holocaust. For a long time after liberation, the Holocaust remained the central theme; regarding this unfathomable human tragedy, various authors and publishers, only in Serbia, for example, have published over a hundred books and more than a thousand of professional and scholarly works. The Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia, and later of Serbia, the Jewish Historical Museum in Belgrade, and individual Jewish communities published more than fifty books on the Holocaust after the end of the Second World War. Recorded and remembered testimonies, personal and family fates and tragic experiences passed on by a few remaining survivors are of inestimable value. The collections *We Survived*⁴, conceptualized according to Yad Vashem's educational philosophy, speaking about the individual, the family, the community, traditions, and life before the war, and then about the numbers, victims, and suffering, represent an exceptional example of such remembrance. Similarly, the Collections of the Jewish Historical Museum and the *Jewish Almanacs* represent an indispensable and valuable source of literature for the study of the history, culture, and national heritage, as well as the destruction of Jewish communities in Serbia and the countries of the former Yugoslavia during the Holocaust.

The Jewish Digital Library (JDL)

The preservation, unification, and presentation of written Jewish heritage require engagement and knowledge not only of Jewish history, religion, art and culture, but also professional experience and insight into the entire publishing activity. It implies the exploration of various funds and collections, an assessment of their

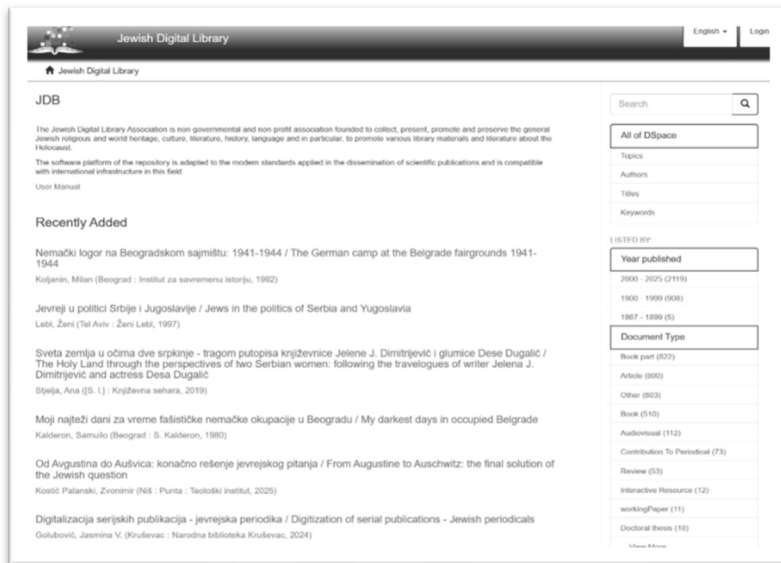
⁴ Five collections in Serbian (*Mi smo preživeli* [We Survived]) and four in English (*We Survived*) have been deposited in the Jewish Digital Library both as complete collections and as individual testimonies, under the topic of the same title.

current condition, and their practical value. With the start of the internet, electronic databases, scanning, and computer processing, these tasks have been greatly accelerated, allowing the material created in digital form to be more easily classified, unified, and utilized. The initiators and founders of the *Jewish Digital Library Association*⁵ recognized the additional potential in connecting these processes and initiated the formation of a unique, interactive, comprehensive, and recognizable digital database. They defined priority goals from the creation and maintenance of a reliable and systematized thematic collection of documents, increasing the visibility and availability of digital content in Serbian and other languages pertaining to Jewish heritage, preservation and easier research of the material about the Holocaust in Serbia and the former Yugoslavia online, with open access⁶ to free browsing, use and download of the literature. Owing to the professional and precisely defined work regarding identifying, collecting, and digitizing materials, along with their expert classification, processing, and the entry of metadata into the repository, which is accessible via the internet to users around the world, this initiative has the potential to become a valuable link in the networking and promotion of the entirety of Jewish heritage. At the same time, by connecting personal and family histories with local and national history, this library can also be used by researchers and professionals whose work, or studies focus on Jewish history, and especially the Holocaust.

The library is focused on establishing a connection and cooperation with Jewish communities, as well as local, national, and international scholarly and cultural institutions, and non-governmental organizations. By continuously collecting and permanently preserving the digitized materials related to the Yugoslav Jewish community and the victims who perished during the Holocaust and by ensuring full accessibility to this material, this Library has become a unique and recognizable destination for numerous users who engage with Jewish heritage.

⁵ The association was registered in May 2019 with the Serbian Business Registers Agency (APR).

⁶ Open access (OA) is free, unrestricted online access to scientific works, primarily academic articles, books, and dissertations.



Home page of the Repository

Identification, collection, and deposition of materials

The identification and collection of thematic materials, as well as the formation of the Repository, began with participation in projects of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Serbia (FJCS) related to the study and documentation of the Holocaust period in Serbia (in 2019 and 2020)⁷, and through cooperation with the University of Belgrade Computer Centre.

These two projects included the digitization of 120 books, the analytical processing of 1,200 articles, and the creation of corresponding metadata. During the project, over 25,000 pages from publications of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Serbia (formerly Yugoslavia), the Jewish Historical Museum, and various Jewish communities in Serbia were digitized. These publications largely re-

⁷ The first project included a total of 51 books with around 17,000 digitized pages and 1,200 articles, all of which were analytically processed and described with appropriate metadata.

flect the work and activities of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Serbia/Yugoslavia, which, as the umbrella Jewish institution, was founded and operated as far back as the time of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. After the end of the Second World War, the few survivors not only managed to restore this institution and continue its work under the same recognizable name⁸, but also, through their publishing efforts, made a significant contribution to the study, preservation, and promotion of the entire Jewish heritage. For many years, the use of these publications was limited, and only through digitization and their deposition in the Repository did they become visible and fully accessible to users, libraries, archives, museums, and Jewish organizations. By creating digital copies, access to these publications has, on one hand, become incomparably easier and faster, and on the other, significantly more efficient, especially in the case of rare and old materials, which are now protected from further damage through the existence of digital copies.

The Repository

The activities of the JDL are largely focused on maintaining and developing the Repository, which represents an organized collection of various digitized documents.⁹ The Repository primarily archives documents that have already been created in digital format or have subsequently been scanned and processed.¹⁰ Given its purpose and function, the JDL Repository is based on a core set of metadata used for processing, archiving, preserving, and ensuring the visibility of materials, which can be adjusted and expanded as needed. Among various software models, JDL chose to use as its

⁸ The name of this institution has always contained the words Union of Jewish Communities, while the name of the country has varied.

⁹ In this context, the word document is used for various types of library, archival, or museum materials, such as books, articles, memoirs, diaries, photographs, posters, archival documents, letters, etc.

¹⁰ Dragana Stolić, *LibGuides: Searching information sources – how to find literature: Digital repositories*, 2019. Retrieved January 25, 2024, from <https://uni-lib.libguides.com/c.php?g=660498&p=4664241>.

operating platform the open-source software DSpace. The Computer Center of the University of Belgrade (CCUB)¹¹ adapted the software to the specific needs and requirements of this thematic repository. The software was developed according to modern standards related to data management, access, preservation, dissemination, and visibility; it is compatible with international infrastructure, Creative Commons licenses, copyright regulations, and open access conditions. The data stored in the Repository can be distributed via the Internet or other physical media.

Digitization

The goal of digitization is to transfer and store printed and other materials in a new, digital format, to facilitate access to resources related to Jewish heritage and the Holocaust, and to enable easier transfer of metadata and bibliographic descriptions. The entire process includes researching, choosing, and selecting material for digitization and deposit; scanning, “de-reading”, or optical character recognition (OCR), technical preparation¹², file naming, creating abstracts and keywords in Serbian and English, entering metadata, adding digital objects and organizing them into appropriate themes within the Repository. Given that the database hosts various types of materials (books, scholarly papers, archival documents, conference proceedings, posters, educational and teaching materials, photographs, exhibition catalogues, audio and video recor-

¹¹ CCUB has customized the DSpace software platform and developed a range of tools that allow institutions in Serbia to establish their own institutional repositories for scientific outputs and publications in open access. CCUB handles technical maintenance and provides support for the use of digital repositories <https://rcub.bg.ac.rs/en/repositorizacija2.html>, September 1, 2023.

¹² Technical preparation, besides OCR, also includes cropping and splitting pages, aligning margins, reducing file sizes, decreasing resolution, and optimizing for reading on a computer or a phone. Processed articles from journals or edited volumes are supplemented with cover and preliminary pages, the publication’s table of contents, and sometimes the imprint or CIP (Cataloguing in Publication), so that the publication’s source is visible on the internet even without the associated metadata from the JDL Repository.

dings, presentations, and other content), and that they come in different formats¹³, the selection of the adaptable DSpace platform has provided the technical capabilities to expand or enhance the existing Repository with new segments.

Depositing, Access, Document Types, Preservation, and Use of Metadata

Records in the Repository consist of deposited files and the metadata that describe them. The deposited files are publicly accessible, except for those restricted by agreements, copyrights, or those with delayed access. Metadata is freely available to everyone and may be used in accordance with the CC license. Once the input process is complete, the metadata is visible, either through the basic display, or via the standard Dublin Core metadata view¹⁴.

Various types of documents can be deposited in the Repository; multiple versions of the same document can also be deposited, particularly in the case of scholarly or professional articles. These may include drafts and working documents, non-peer reviewed or peer-reviewed versions, corrected and final manuscripts, or published versions. The information about a version is clearly marked, which is especially useful for researchers who wish to share their texts or connect with other authors working on similar topics. In this context, authors focusing on Jewish heritage and the Holocaust are often willing to share their work with the Jewish Digital Library, typically under a non-commercial license¹⁵. In doing so, they help increase the visibility of both their individual works and the broader body of Jewish written

¹³ In the JDL Repository, it is possible to deposit textual, graphic, tabular, video, and audio files. The recommended, open, and sustainable formats are: for text (PDF/A, TXT, HTML, XML, CSV); for images and graphic materials (TIFF, JPEG 2000); for audio (WAVE, AIFF); for video (MOV, Motion JPEG 2000); and for tabular data (CSV, XML).

¹⁴ Dublin Core is a set or schema of core metadata that is used to describe digital or physical resources and to enable their finding.

¹⁵ Creative Commons (CC) or the commons of creative works. Depending on the selected license, the author retains only some (or waives all) rights to their work. <https://creativecommons.org/cc-licenses/>

heritage. In return, the JDL enables them to add an ORCID¹⁶ identifier as well as to download and export citations in several citation styles¹⁷.

Hosting of digital objects and associated metadata stored in the Repository is provided by the Computer Center of the University of Belgrade. The Center is responsible for its ongoing maintenance and development. The services provided include secure, uninterrupted, and smooth operation of the servers, administration of the operating system, database, and system software, as well as appropriate protection.

Further use of metadata is regulated by the established international standard OAI-PMH¹⁸, which governs their exchange and integration into the European infrastructure of digital repositories of scientific results in open access. This protocol represents a standard application programming interface (API) for copying records from one system to another. Among many other advantages, this application enables the retrieval of bibliographic data, i.e. metadata from other systems and their transfer into new ones. In this way, gathered and standardized metadata and digital objects, connected with similar databases and related institutions and centers for the study of Jewish heritage in Serbia and worldwide, produce higher quality and more accurate search results.

Respecting Copyright and Publisher Rights

Authors and publishers who wish the digital copies of their publications to be deposited in the JDL Repository¹⁹ must complete

¹⁶ ORCID (Open Researcher and Contributor ID) is a permanent digital personal identifier that enables automatic linkage between an author, their works, and professional activities. It is intended both for individual researchers and for organizations involved in research, such as universities, laboratories, and commercial research companies.

¹⁷ Currently, these are: RIS, BibTex, APA, Vancouver, and Chicago.

¹⁸ Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH) – A protocol for the Open Archives Initiative to collect metadata.

¹⁹ It is important to emphasize the difference between the original document and the digital copy. All rights to the physical form of the material remain with the authors and publishers, while JDL holds copyright only over the management software, digital copies, and the metadata contained in the Repository.

and sign a consent form and submit the publications in the recommended format²⁰. In addition, they may establish a long-term cooperation agreement with JDL to ensure permanent archiving of their digital copies as well as greater visibility of their publications. Regardless of the form of consent, it is always clearly stated that JDL is a non-commercial project that serves the purposes of research and education. Access to, searching within, downloading full texts, and linking to its content is unlimited and free of charge for all. In return, users are expected to comply with legal regulations related to copyright and the good practices of using open web resources.

Many institutions, organizations, publishers, and authors give their consent for their works to be included in this database, convinced that by doing so they contribute further to the visibility and promotion of their publications, but also to the research and enrichment of Jewish heritage as a whole. For example, there are signed agreements of cooperation with the Federation of Jewish Communities, the Jewish Historical Museum, Jewish communities in Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, as well as with the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, the Museum of Genocide Victims, the Faculty of Philology and Arts at the University of Kragujevac, the Research and Documentation Center (CENDO), and the NGOs Haver Serbia and Terraforming, among others. We give special mention to the collaboration with Holocaust survivors—Aleksandar Aizenberg, Venecija Levi-Breder, and others who have entrusted their testimonies to this Repository.

Search Functionality

For the sake of simple and functional use, the structure of the Repository is organized according to topics, which reflect recognizable content in its broadest sense. These topics are divided into sub-topics and collections, depending on whether they group materials under a common title (e.g. issues and years of a journal), or

²⁰ For more information about depositing, see the JDL website in the “About JDL” section via the link <https://jevrejskadigitalnabiblioteka.rs/contact>.

represent related materials within a broader theme (e.g. history of the Jews). It is definitely important to note that a single document may appear in multiple collections, if it addresses various topics.

In addition to browsing by the topic, the Repository can be searched by entering a specific term in the search field²¹, by selecting keywords from an alphabetical index, or by year of publication, document type and version, and collection. The same types of searches are available within individual themes, where results can be displayed by authors, titles, or keywords.

Visibility and Cooperation

By establishing a recognisable thematic online Repository, the Jewish Digital Library (JDL) has also connected with international aggregators that harvest and share data from the DSpace platform, thereby significantly increasing its visibility and traffic. In that way the content of the Repository has been accessible from its very beginning through the World Catalog (WorldCat), the largest global network for library content and services, the Global Directory of Open Access Repositories (OpenDOAR), Google Scholar, the academic literature search engine, and the CORE aggregator for open access research papers.

From its establishment, this library has been promoted by the Center for Jewish Art and Culture Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, through its traditional workshop *Jewish Art and Tradition*. At the international conference of the Association of Jewish Libraries in 2019 it was represented for the first time on the global level, after which it was also visible on the world interactive map of Judaica collections²². At the invitation of the Ministry of Edu-

²¹ We have previously mentioned that during processing, all documents undergo OCR (optical character recognition), which enables the searching of the full text of all deposited documents. For this reason, the JDL differs from many other databases that can only be searched by authors, titles, or publication years. This service is of immeasurable importance to users and it significantly reduces the time required for research.

²² <https://jewishlibraries.org/mapping-ajl/>, 14 November 2023.

cation and Science and the Faculty of Philosophy, an educational lecture on Jewish written heritage and use of the Repository was also held during a webinar for educators in Serbia. Particularly valuable is the collaboration with Wikipedia Serbia, established as part of the international GLAM project for Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums, as well as at an Editing marathon for creating and expanding articles about notable Jews, Judaism, Jewish culture, and history when 70 new topics were added, linked to the content and sources from the JDL. Jewish Digital Library is also represented on the Digital History portal which collects websites and internet resources related to history, historiography, and archival science, as well as on the “National Education Portal” of the Institute for the Improvement of Education and Upbringing. It is also a part of the Networks Overcoming Antisemitism (NOA).

In order to find and collect materials, this library strives to expand its cooperation and to connect with similar institutions and organisations, both in the country and abroad. In addition to domestic libraries, archives, and museums, it maintains ongoing cooperation with the National Library of Israel, the Eventov Archive, Centropa, and other organizations and individuals.

By redirecting literature into the digital realm, numerous opportunities arise for its use, virtual connection, analysis and search functionality. Literature on Jewish topics which is being collected in the JDL Repository has thus become accessible to a much broader audience worldwide; among others, original and authentic documents previously unknown and unpublished are archived there. By integrating and synchronising metadata, networking digital objects, and linking them with similar databases, institutions, and centers for the study of Judaism and the Holocaust both domestically and internationally, research is made easier for users and scholars, and the broader public is given better insight and familiarity with this subject matter. Due to all this, and mostly due to its responsible and professional operation, Jewish Digital Library has become recognized and has earned a reputation not only in Serbia and the countries of the former Yugoslavia, but also within corresponding international circles.

Summary

The article examines the historical foundations, development, and contemporary significance of the Jewish Digital Library (JDL) as a central platform for the preservation and study of Jewish heritage in Serbia and the broader Yugoslav region. It begins by outlining the richness of Jewish cultural and intellectual life prior to the Second World War, emphasizing the extensive publishing activity, institutional networks, and cultural hubs that once existed, as well as the devastating losses inflicted during the Holocaust. The author underscores that surviving fragments of this heritage are today dispersed across various institutions, often insufficiently catalogued or accessible.

Within this context, the JDL is presented as a response to both the fragmentation and vulnerability of Jewish written heritage. The paper details the processes involved in building the repository, including identification, digitization, metadata standardization, and long-term preservation. Special attention is given to the technological infrastructure (notably the use of DSpace), open-access principles, and interoperability standards that enable integration with international research systems.

Beyond its technical dimension, the JDL is interpreted as a collaborative and scholarly network, linking archives, libraries, researchers, and communities. Its role extends from safeguarding rare materials to facilitating new forms of research, enhancing visibility of previously inaccessible sources, and encouraging academic exchange. The article ultimately argues that digital repositories such as the JDL not only preserve memory but actively reshape the ways in which Jewish history—particularly the Holocaust and its aftermath—is researched, interpreted, and communicated in the digital age.

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Јеврејска дигитална библиотека: значај и улога

Резиме

Рад анализира историјске основе, развој и савремени значај Јеврејске дигиталне библиотеке (JDL) као централне платформе за очување и проучавање јеврејског наслеђа у Србији и ширем југословенском простору. Полазећи од богатства је-

врејског културног и интелектуалног живота пре Другог светског рата, ауторка указује на развијену издавачку делатност, институционалне мреже и културне центре, као и на њихово готово потпуно уништење током Холокауста. Посебно се истиче да су преостали трагови тог наслеђа данас расути по различитим институцијама и често недовољно обрађени и доступни.

У том контексту, Јеврејска дигитална библиотека се представља као одговор на фрагментираност и угроженост писаног наслеђа. Рад детаљно описује процесе изградње репозиторијума, укључујући идентификацију грађе, дигитализацију, стандардизацију метаподатака и њихово дугорочно чување. Посебна пажња посвећена је технолошкој основи система (пре свега платформи DSpace), принципима отвореног приступа и стандардима који омогућавају повезивање са међународним научним инфраструктурама.

Поред техничког аспекта, JDL се тумачи као сарадничка и научна мрежа која повезује архиве, библиотеке, истраживаче и заједнице. Њена улога превазилази очување грађе и обухвата омогућавање нових истраживачких приступа, повећање видљивости раније недоступних извора и подстицање научне размене. Ауторка закључује да дигитални репозиторијуми попут JDL не само да чувају сећање, већ и активно преобликују начине на које се јеврејска историја, нарочито Холокауст и његове последице, истражују и тумаче у дигиталном добу.

Кључне речи: јеврејска историја, јеврејско писано наслеђе, дигитални репозиторијум, дигитализација, дисеминација, Холокауст